

# Rehabilitating the Dnipro River



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*Roula El-Raifi*

[Photo: Myron Lahola (left) and Ihor Iskra sample water from the Dnipro River, at IDRC's Kyiv Office.]

There's more to rehabilitating a river than cleaning up pollution. It's also a state of mind.

That's one of the lessons from an ambitious program to clean up Ukraine's Dnipro River basin — source of 70% of the country's drinking water. Since the program was launched in 1994, with CA\$4.8 million in funding from the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the [Canadian International Development Agency](#), it has evolved into a revamp of Ukrainian environmental policy and public attitudes.

## **First western country**

In 1991, Canada was the first western country to recognize Ukraine's independence and to extend an offer of technical assistance. Ukraine is one of the most environmentally degraded republics of the former Soviet Union, with 70% of its population living in areas considered environmentally dangerous, and the Dnipro River is the country's number one environmental priority. The river's main sources of pollution include nuclear fallout from the Chernobyl disaster, toxic pesticides and herbicides used in agriculture, heavy metals and organochlorine compounds from industry, untreated sewage from municipalities, and high levels of air pollution.

Although polluted, the Dnipro is the country's lifeblood. "It's everything for Ukraine: it's life, irrigation, energy supply, drinking water supply, transportation artery, and so on," says Ihor Iskra, a Ukrainian national and liaison officer with the project in Kyiv, which is known formally as Environmental Management Development in Ukraine (EMDU).

## **Consumption attitude**

"This river is really heavily polluted [mainly] because of our historical heritage," Iskra adds. "In the Soviet era, there was a consumption attitude to the river. Maybe slowly, people will start to think more and more about environmental protection. The main problem is to change the mentality, to make people care more about the environment and the rivers."

According to [Myron Lahola](#), Director of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s Kyiv Office, which is managing the EMDU program on behalf of the Canadian government, this initiative involves much more than just cleaning up a river. "That implies that you're out there with shovels or something. We ultimately are concerned with cleaning up the river, but we're doing it more in the policy development, capacity building, and technology transfer type of way."

## **Capacity building**

"The strategy that we've employed is to build on the existing capacity," Lahola explains. "The unique role of IDRC here is to bring together researchers from different institutes," and, as needed, to include international experts in the research team, adds Iskra.

IDRC has encountered significant overlap among Ukrainian institutions. For example, three or more different agencies were conducting essentially identical work, such as measuring water quality, but using different standards, making comparisons impossible. Moreover, data were often hoarded or kept secret, a legacy of the Soviet era.

## **IDRC's role**

In response, the Centre has brought together Ukrainian experts who used to work independently. IDRC has also helped Ukrainian authorities establish their own management committee to review and prioritize proposals for research projects on the river. Selected projects are then suggested to IDRC for funding. The focus has been on small pilot projects, to demonstrate how "rapidly and at little cost, by introducing new technologies and management technology ideas," improvement can be achieved, says Lahola.

For example, Lahola's first contact with EMDU was through a 1995 water-metering project in the southeastern city of Zaporizhzhya, done in conjunction with his native Edmonton, Alberta. The recently privatized water utility in Edmonton donated 1,400 reconditioned water meters, provided expertise, and helped to train staff. The pilot project involved installing water meters in select locations to show that as much as 40% of treated water is lost during distribution. This means that the current pricing system, based on the amount of water treated and the number of consumers, is often overbilling consumers and water conservation could be a good alternative to the costly expansion of water treatment plants.

## **Key achievements**

One of the program's main achievements to date was its formal recognition in Ukraine's National Environmental Plan, adopted by the country's parliament in February 1998. Another important development was the creation of the Dnipro Renaissance Fund — a non-governmental organization with expertise in environmental audits gained through EMDU — to manage funds received from domestic and foreign sources, including the Canadian government. "There was no banking system in the early days," explains Lahola. "Most of the money was carried back and forth in cash as people traveled. It was several years before we could establish a bank account and transfer funds in a normal way."

Phase two of the EMDU program, which began last year with funding from CIDA, involves a wide range of activities. They include municipal water projects, environmental education, training in project and environmental management, trans-boundary pollution issues, water toxicology, environmental audits and clean manufacturing standards, solid waste and landfill remediation, all working towards the rehabilitation of the Dnipro River Basin.

## Broad impact

"In all, the Program has had a very broad impact" for a relatively low cost, stresses Lahola. "We've managed to throw a really broad net with not much money," because EMDU had a specific focus, the Dnipro River, and because it involved local institutions in the work, which led to their "buy-in" through financial and in-kind support for the Program, he concludes.

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